

FROM RIDICULE TO RESPECT



Getting the Church
back on course

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Is there still hope for our Church, divided as it is by unresolved theological issues? I believe there is, but only on one condition. We must be willing to take a fresh look at our 2000 year heritage and the beginnings of Christianity.

The scene was set under the jurisdiction of a Roman procurator who played a decisive part in the trial of Jesus Christ. He is specifically mentioned in the Apostles' Creed: "... suffered under Pontius Pilate".

Unheeded by the world, Jesus is on trial again. Perhaps we would rather watch from the safety of the spectators' galleries, but that option is not open to us. Seats are available for active participants only. The legal process parallels the earlier trial, and so it is worth taking a careful look at the Gospel accounts.

A twofold charge and a twofold verdict

Jesus' trial focussed on two charges, and both times it was His own words that cemented the verdict. He confirmed that He was God's Son and that He was King of the Jews (Luke 22:70 and 23:3). He was charged on both counts, and both times the verdict was "guilty".

What appears to be a twist of fate is in fact a deeply significant part of God's plan. Specific

circumstances led to Jews and Gentiles sharing the responsibility for Jesus' death. John's gospel tells us of two occasions before the crucifixion when Jesus narrowly escaped stoning. His hour had not yet come and God had a different plan. It was the twists and turns of the political situation that brought this plan to fulfilment.

According to historical accounts, forty years before the temple was destroyed in AD 70, the Sanhedrin (Jewish supreme court) temporarily forfeited its legal right to enforce the death penalty. Until then (AD 30) Jesus would have been stoned in accordance with existing Jewish law¹ and His death would have remained a purely Jewish affair.

Protecting our own interests

The case against Jesus was initially made on a totally religious basis, and Pilate dismissed it. For the Jewish leaders this meant additional complications and an unwelcome delay in the proceedings. As it became obvious that to secure a death sentence the charge would have to be political, they accused Pilate of being no friend of Caesar's, finally breaking down his resistance. With his career at risk, Pilate's good intentions gave way. He ignored his wife's warnings and betrayed his own conscience, condemning Jesus to death by the most brutal form of execution known under Roman rule: crucifixion. At the decisive moment, political expediency and the lust for power prevented him from standing up

1) Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, FOOTSTEPS OF THE MESSIAH /
see also John 18:31–32

for the truth – a behaviour pattern that we recognize in ourselves.

Pilate himself wrote the inscription with the politicized charge against Jesus and had it attached to the head of the Cross in three languages. Tradition immortalized it with the initials INRI²⁾, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews”, often seen on crucifixes. Here is the charge that sent Jesus to His death like a common criminal. The inscription stands for the truth that Christians everywhere recognize, but it was written in contempt, ridiculing Jesus and His Jewish people before an international audience. To this day we have failed to see further than the mockery. We have yet to grasp the ethical implications.

Centuries of persecution

Whereas INRI traditionally represents the words attached to the Cross, the Church neither understood nor acknowledged the truth of the allegation against Jesus, so the mockery was never renounced. There was no defence of Jesus’ Jewish identity because none was deemed necessary. Significantly, for centuries the Church was guilty of persecuting the Jews.

Is Jesus the Son of God? For mainstream Christians the answer has always been “Yes”, a “Yes” that is clearly expressed in our creeds. But is Jesus the King of the Jews? History suggests that the Church never took this question seriously enough to give a clear response. As the Son of God, Jesus

2) The three languages were Hebrew, Greek and Latin.
The traditional acronym represents the Latin IESVS
NAZARENVS REX IVDAEORVM.

was thought to be above the confines of nationality and His Jewishness was never addressed. The inscription on the Cross was understood as an expression of Roman contempt that need not concern us further. But this was the starting point for an insidious error: Jesus was welcomed as the Son of God but not as the King of the Jews. Thus Christianity was led astray, and instead of being their strongest protector, the Church became the Jews' most avid persecutor.

A disastrous “cleansing”

In Nazi Germany this development reached an unparalleled climax. In order to “cleanse” the nation of Jewish blood, Jesus was to be stripped of His Jewishness and turned into an Aryan, while Jews themselves were subjected to public contempt, derision and ridicule, and left at the mercy of their killers. Belief in Jesus as “Son of God” and as “King of the Jews” were torn apart. Reading the Old Testament was a suspect and dangerous activity, while a number of theologians – names that are known and respected to this day – set about “cleansing the New Testament of Jewish influences”, with unprecedented blindness.

Can Christians be counted on?

As Christians we now have work to do: we are called to draw attention to the Jewish Jesus in our churches and fellowships and to love and honour Jesus as a Jew. Only then will Jews be able to count on the help of Christians and look to the Church for protection. This change of heart goes much further than recognizing Christianity’s Jewish roots.

The inscription on the Cross puts us under an obligation to acknowledge Jesus' own Jewishness. We cannot remain neutral – neither could Pilate. Jesus said to Pilate, “Everyone on the side of truth listens to me” (John 18:37). And He says the same to us today. We need to make up our minds: either we stand up for the truth or we deny it.

“Your people will be my people!”

What does this mean in practical terms? Blindly idealizing all things Jewish is not only unrealistic, it is also unbiblical. A general feeling of solidarity with Israel isn't enough either, for it will not stand the test. Ruth, a Gentile from Moab, would settle for nothing short of unwavering faithfulness: “Your people will be my people and where you die, I will die ...” (see Ruth 1:16–17). Nothing was to separate her from Naomi. If we really love Jesus above all else, our love of His people will transcend that of our own people and country, and overcome denominational bias. Like Ruth we will receive a blessing that will surpass all we can imagine.

Faithful to our commitment, let us do our best to make good our failures by restoring to Israel what we have robbed them of: a love for Jesus in all His Jewishness. At the same time we need to be aware that this is a people who have been deeply traumatized by nearly 2000 years of persecution. Generally speaking, they are much more conscious of Christianity's murderous history than most Christians. We do well to find out more about the presumption and blindness with which we misused the Name of the Lord, the Cross, Holy

Communion and Baptism.³⁾ All of these were perverted into instruments of cruel persecution for the Jews.

The second “Yes”

Jesus brought about His own verdict with a twofold “Yes”. As Christians we must echo each “Yes” and put it into effect. Jesus was condemned for being God’s Son, but He was nailed to the Cross as King of the Jews. This is where we need to rethink our stance, to repent and change our attitude. What began as ridicule must in future be our respectful confession. We need a new approach to Bible reading, moving away from the bias of tradition and letting the Holy Spirit guide and enlighten us. Jesus is Son of God and Son of Man, and in the same way we cannot separate the Son of God from the King of the Jews. When Jesus was born, it was wise men from the East who asked the right question, “Where is the King of the Jews?” Yet at the end, it was also a Gentile who passed an unjust verdict condemning Him to die. But the story of this King continues. The final episode hasn’t been written yet and we can still see to it that it takes a positive turn. This is an episode that belongs in the present.

A promising future

Jesus says to His disciples, “Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (Matthew 10:23). Evi-

3) For further information see **THE GUILT OF CHRISTIANITY TOWARDS THE JEWISH PEOPLE** (20 pages),
Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary, Darmstadt, Germany

dently, as there will be towns in Israel when Jesus comes again, He does not think of Israel's history as being only in the past. Global politics focus blindly on removing the "hindrance for world peace". We seem to be oblivious to the fact that Israel's enemies have already removed the State of Israel and its towns from their maps. But Jesus' words hold true, and today thousands among His own Jewish people are waiting to welcome and honour Him with the words, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Matthew 23:39). This is a sure sign that He is coming back soon.

God is faithful and will crown Jesus King, but not just over His own people; He will appoint Him ruler of every nation on earth. The mockery of the INRI inscription will not be the last word. Jesus' Jewish identity is plainly indicated in His final "I AM" statement, "I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star" (Revelation 22:16). Now is the time for us to get ready to welcome the King of the Jews!

"The Lord needs us"

Jesus made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem riding a borrowed donkey. Now it's us He needs. Our work is to play our part in preparation for the coming of our long-expected King, the grand finale of our present Christian era. We can do this best by offering ourselves to serve wherever needed. And if anyone asks what we are doing, the answer is simply, "the Lord needs us" (see Luke 19:31). It is our special privilege in the Church to be the "donkey" that carries Jesus to His own people as well as to our Christian congregations

and fellowships near and far. Obviously it isn't the donkey that is honoured. All the glory goes to Jesus, the King of the Jews!

Only by sharing the spirit of our gentle and humble King Jesus will we be able to fulfil this great mission. There will be no triumphal parade for His disciples, but only the chance to sacrifice our lives and to suffer scorn and condemnation for His sake. "You will be hated by all nations because of me", said Jesus (Matthew 24:9). The Jews have suffered under this hatred for centuries. So have Christians, but their suffering was limited to certain times and areas. Here in the West, we have still to experience the fulfilment of these prophetic words.

The INRI inscription will yet have consequences for us: our faith will be tested as by fire. In ourselves we are too weak to face what lies ahead, but Jesus' desire is to make us strong!

**"NOT BY MIGHT
NOR BY POWER,
BUT BY MY SPIRIT,"
SAYS THE
LORD ALMIGHTY.**

Zechariah 4:6

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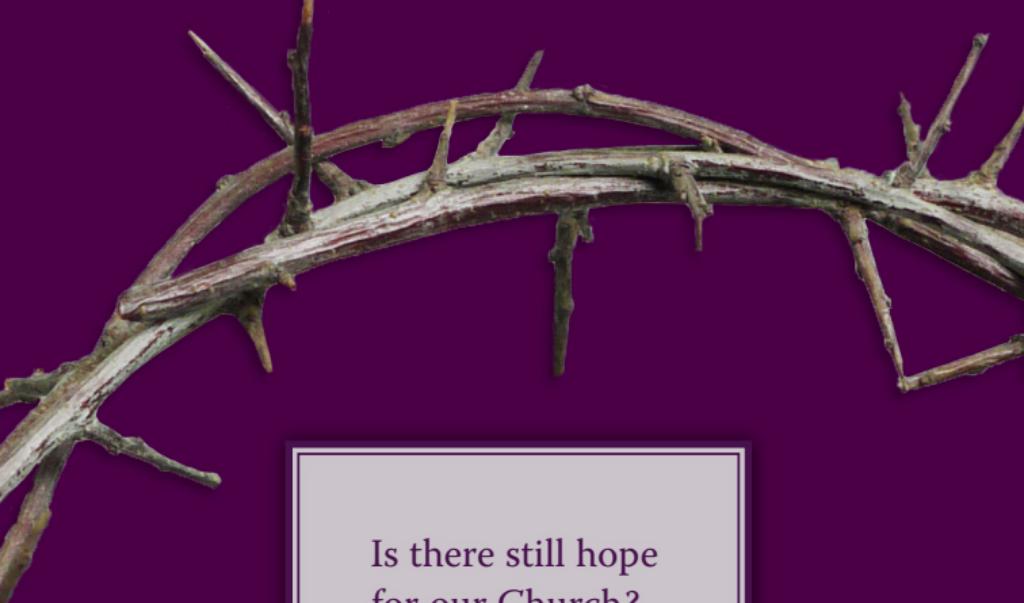
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for our Church?

Only on one condition. We must be willing to take a fresh look at our 2000 year heritage and the beginnings of Christianity.

An unusual and thought-provoking perspective.

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